

Sophocles' *Ajax* and the vase-painters

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This article investigates the relationship between Sophocles' *Ajax* and ancient vase painting, and points out that aspects of the play which seem highly original are in fact anticipated by the portrayal of the myth on Greek vases.

The suicide of Sophocles' Ajax forms one of the most memorable scenes in Greek tragedy. The warrior emerges onto an empty stage, and grimly describes the sword, hidden inside the stage building, on which he will kill himself:

The slaughterer stands where it will be sharpest – if a man has leisure to make calculations – the gift of Hector, the man most hateful of foreigners to me, and most detestable to see. It stands fixed in the hostile land of Troy, newly sharpened on an iron-gnawing whetstone. I planted it, securing it well all round, so that it should prove most kind to me in providing a speedy death. Thus I am well prepared.

Ajax displays a workmanlike attitude, taking pride in his efficient organization of the machinery of death. His world has collapsed, his reputation lies in ruins: but he manages to impose order at least on this small, dreadful task. He then addresses the gods, making specific requests of each: of Zeus, to ensure that his half-brother, Teucer, finds his body first; Hermes, to grant him a speedy end to his life; the Erinyes (Furies), to punish the Greeks, his enemies; the Sun, to proclaim his death to his parents. He finishes with a moving invocation of his homeland, Salamis, and the plains of Troy that have nourished him; his speech over, he rushes inside, out of sight of the audience, to put an end to his life.

The whole scene is taken up by this single monologue, delivered by Ajax to an empty stage: an almost unparalleled event in Greek drama, which reinforces the loneliness of the protagonist during his final moments. By contrast, Aeschylus' treatment of this myth in his play *The Thracian Women* (which survives only in fragments) had Ajax's death announced by a Messenger, as deaths usually are in tragedy. Perhaps Sophocles spotted an

opportunity to focus on an aspect of the story neglected by his great tragic predecessor: the emotional state of the protagonist immediately before his suicide.

His portrayal of that state is remarkable. Despite his desperate situation, Ajax's speech contains 'no lament, reproach, world-weariness, aversion, no hint of melancholy' (in the words of the great German scholar, Karl Reinhardt). It is surprisingly forward-looking for a suicide speech, with all those precise and formal requests to the gods, and Ajax's anticipation of the reaction of friend and foe to his passing. A fragmentary speech from another tragedy, perhaps rather later than Sophocles' play, presents Ajax's final moments in a more straightforward fashion: there, the warrior bitterly laments his dishonour by the other Greeks. Sophocles' Ajax has previously indulged in such laments too, but in this final oration he conspicuously avoids them. His emotion never descending into self-pity, he finishes his life with grandeur and dignity as well as passion.

Exekias' Ajax

From a literary perspective, then, Sophocles' handling of aspects of the story is novel and unexpected. Nevertheless, he was not the first creative artist to focus on Ajax's emotional state during this final stage of his life. In the mid-sixth century, a hundred years or so before Sophocles' play, the Athenian vase-painter Exekias had shown Ajax immediately before his suicide. On the vase he is placing his sword in the ground, where he has heaped up a small pile of supporting earth (the very action that Sophocles' character would later describe). Lines on his brow eloquently convey emotion, but the nature of that emotion remains unclear. Anxiety about the suicide? Concern for the fate of his body, or his dependants, after his death? Or grief and sorrow

caused by his failure to win the dead Achilles' armour? The painted figure will not tell us. On the left is a palm tree, on the right his helmet, shield, and spears. These replace the bystanders who often look in on the central scene in black-figure vase paintings, and thus emphasize the loneliness of the warrior. Like Sophocles, Exekias manipulates the conventions of his medium to illustrate Ajax's isolation.

Just as Sophocles diverged from his tragic predecessor, Aeschylus, in presenting his account of Ajax's death, so too Exekias' image is quite different from previous depictions. From as early as 700, more than a century before Exekias, painters were fascinated by the image of Ajax lying face down, pierced through by his sword (above). The massive bulk of his body is apparent, as if to mark him out as something larger than life, a beast as well as a man; often his hands cover his head, as if to signal his shame. Exekias' picture breaks away from this tradition. His achievement was to portray not the mighty warrior in death, but the pitiful anxiety of a desperate man. Ajax's final moments continue to interest painters after Exekias: two red-figure vases from the first half of the fifth century show Ajax kneeling, mouth open on one, arms outstretched on the other (left). Viewers will conclude that the warrior is making a final prayer before his suicide, but to whom, and for what, we cannot tell.

A memorable scene: the burial of Ajax

Other aspects of Sophocles' play make a first appearance, as it were, on painted pottery. The last part of the drama features Teucer's encounters with Menelaus and Agamemnon, who come to forbid Ajax's burial. Their arguments play out on a stage dominated by the warrior's corpse, which his concubine Tecmessa and her attendants have brought out from behind the stage building into a central position on the stage. The subject of these confrontations thus lies prominently between the participants, in a powerful visual tableau: Ajax dominates the action even in death. Yet just such a tableau can be found on a Corinthian mixing-bowl from about 600 B.C., which shows two armed warriors

facing each other over Ajax's corpse (below). The blocking suggests a dispute with Ajax as its subject, quite possibly in connection with his burial. A slightly later Corinthian cup depicts a series of named Greek leaders (Nestor, Phoenix, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Diomedes, Teucer, lesser Ajax) standing on either side of Ajax's body, spears in hand (opposite page, top). Here too the dead Ajax is apparently the focus of an argument. The visual experience of Sophocles' audience had long-standing artistic precedent, for all the playwright's theatrical originality.

Memorable gestures: Tecmessa's grief

Even brief gestures on stage can be anticipated in the visual arts. When Tecmessa has discovered Ajax's body and brought it out to centre stage, she covers the corpse with her robe or veil, saying as she does so

He must not be seen. Rather, I shall cover him completely in this enfolding shroud, since no one who loved him could bear to look on him . . . O unhappy Ajax, what a man you are, and what a fate you endure! How worthy of receiving laments even in the eyes of your enemies!

This moving action recalls how Andromache in the *Iliad* discards her veil and headdress (given to her by Aphrodite on her wedding day) when she sees her husband Hector killed by Achilles. In each case, the woman's disrobing acts as a visual symbol of her intense grief. Tecmessa does not simply remove her garment, however: she places it on her dead lover, in a profound display of care. But Sophocles was not the first to make use of this affecting gesture in telling Ajax's story. An Attic cup painted when Sophocles was a boy shows a young woman in the act of covering the body of a man impaled face up on a sword (right). The two figures will represent Ajax and a female companion: presumably a concubine, since the Greek camp, where Ajax killed himself, would have had no place for any other women. Whether the painter and his public thought of that concubine as 'Tecmessa', or whether Sophocles first associated that name with the myth of Ajax, we cannot tell. What is apparent is the painter's strikingly original take on the portrayal of Ajax's dead body. Instead of furnishing a locus for male disputation, as in the depictions discussed above, his body is the recipient of feminine affection: the loneliness of the suicide is mitigated by the woman's concern.

Pots and plays: a complex dialogue

In the past scholars of Greek tragedy would often assume that vases showing

scenes similar to those found in particular dramas must have been influenced by the relevant plays. But the relationship between pots and plays is much more complex than that. The above examples show that the finest vase painters needed no inspiration from playwrights. They were artists in their own right, who independently fashioned many of the visual effects that Sophocles would strive to effect many years later on the stage. Sophocles might have been influenced by visual depictions (not necessarily limited to painted pottery) as well as previous literary accounts. Be that as it may, the lazy assumption that pictures are secondary, and text primary, is unsustainable. These images have a profound contribution to make to our understanding of Greek myth, and no-one studying Greek tragedy at any level can afford to neglect them.

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